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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HAVANA 000913

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SUBJECT: CUBAN DELEGATION AT LASA: GOC APPROACHES ACADEMIA

Classified By: COM: Michael E. Parmly: For reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The 2007 International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) was held in Montreal, Canada, September 5-8. The Cuban delegation was the largest ever to a LASA conference and they portrayed the successful change of venue from the U.S. to Canada as a "victory" over U.S. policy. Most, although not all, Cuba-related sessions were balanced in makeup and discussion. Most Cubans were approachable to Econoff, others a bit apprehensive. There is a fervent academic debate about possible reforms going on. It is clear that the highest levels of the GOC have shown at least some receptiveness to academia. Post will report separately on the economic and then on other issues discussed at LASA by Cuban academics. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The 2007 International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) was held in Montreal, Canada, September 5-8. Originally supposed to be Boston, the venue for the conference was changed by a vote of LASA's governing body. The reason for the change was to avoid a recurrence of the problem of Cubans being excluded from attending the conference in U.S. venues due to U.S. visa denials. At the conference, the 135 scholars, researchers and academics who made up the Cuban delegation -- the largest ever -- exploited every opportunity to praise LASA for their decision. While in the main conference lobby, during a conversation between Econoff and Simon Cridland, Canadian Embassy Pol/Econ Counselor in Havana, Cristina Diaz Lopez, Vice Rector of the University of Havana and head of the Cuban delegation, politely interrupted to tell Simon how much she appreciated his embassy's assistance with the visas. She then, possibly because of Econoff's presence, felt the need to tell Simon, "Ganamos esta batalla" (we won this battle). Predictably, Cuban National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon also manipulated this issue when he delivered the conference's keynote address on September 7. The speech was actually a diatribe against the U.S. containing nothing worth reporting.

The Cuban Delegation

¶3. (C) The Cuban delegation included a large representation of Cuban academia: Economists, anthropologists,

sociologists, writers, artists, professors, researchers, etc.

Out of the conference's 1,111 panels, 131 included presentations by Cubans or about Cuba. Most Cuba-related sessions were balanced in makeup and discussion. A few of the panels, however, were clearly stacked with GOC defenders and U.S. bashers; this was also the case with some of the audiences. (Note: One panel was so biased against U.S. policy that Econoff felt it necessary to express, during the Q&A session, disappointment at the lack of balance in the panel's exposition. Most panels, however, were quite equitable in their discussions. End Note.)

¶4. (C) A good number of the panels focused on specific Cuban issues, while others covered regional topics. The regional or transnational issues panels conveniently provided Cuban presenters with an excuse not to answer specific questions about Cuba. Even with panels dealing specifically with Cuba, when asked the hard questions about Cuba -- such as: To economists, when are the much-debated economic reforms coming?; to Afro-Cuban experts, what is the GOC really doing about racism?; to sociologists and artists, why, with the exception of dissidents, is the current civil society debate happening outside official media channels?; etc. -- the panelist would answer reluctantly with, "This is a question for another panel." (Comment: Even though one could tell some panelists would have liked to answer the question, it was clear that panelists felt that answering would equate to crossing a line that might cause repercussions from the GOC, like jeopardizing their job. End Comment.)

State Security

¶5. (C) Contacts in Havana tell us that the Cuban delegation

HAVANA 00000913 002 OF 003

had "training" sessions prior to and in preparation for the trip. (Comment: We speculate that the sessions, in addition to public speaking and Powerpoint (almost every Cuban had prepared Powerpoint slides, though unfortunately the Montreal hotels did not have the necessary equipment), ensured that everyone clearly understood the limits about what they should talk about and that all were "on message." The message clearly included the LASA "victory" on moving the venue to Montreal. End Comment.) According to one foreign academic expert on Cuba who was in attendance, the group also included some "quasi-academics" who in actuality worked for GOC-state security and were charged with keeping an eye on the rest of the delegation. The academic hypothesized that the reason several Cubans were no-shows at some of the conference panels was that they had submitted bogus papers, though good enough to be accepted by LASA and therefore a ticket into the conference, yet were not in Montreal to present any paper, but rather to spy on each other.

Lucrative Opportunity

¶6. (C) With regard to lodging, the Cuban delegation was spread throughout Montreal, reflecting the various sources of funding that made their trips possible. Some were funded by the GOC, but many others were funded by various academic foundations, NGOs, or other institutions. Accordingly, some stayed with friends or at other cheaper locations outside of town. International outings, for any Cuban, are an opportunity to amass hard currency. The per diem they receive alone can significantly improve their economic livelihood in the island. Tomas Fernandez Robaina, a Cuban race and gender expert from the Cuban National Library, revealed to Econoff that after a fire burned his house in Havana he purposely began to seek out opportunities to go overseas. For the money, he went on extended stays to places like Brazil, Nigeria and the U.S.

Behind the Communist Mask

¶ 7. (C) Making one-on-one contact with members of the Cuban delegation was a very sensitive undertaking. The vast majority were congenial, others were apprehensive and a few were actually scared to speak to a USINT officer. In private conversations with several Cuban academics, however, everyone said they would welcome further contact with Econoff in Havana, but acknowledged that permission was necessary.

(Note: The normal procedure is to request such a meeting via diplomatic note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MinRex). After more than a year in Havana, Econoff has yet to receive a positive response to this type of request from MinRex. End Note.) A few even expressed their willingness to meet without official MinRex approval, and provided a cell phone or private email.

¶ 8. (C) There were a few Cubans who elected to stay hidden behind the Communist/anti-Imperialist/oppressed victim mask (these individuals preferred to project the GOC's problems onto Econoff and USG policy, using examples like the embargo, CIA plots, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, Puerto Rican independence, Posada Carriles, the "five heroes" or Cuban spies, and on and on), but the vast majority of Cubans who interacted with Econoff soon revealed -- in private or even in their papers and presentations -- that they are critical-thinking human beings who believe in trying to improve the current situation in Cuba. They acknowledge the immensity of the country's problems, but they are not dissidents and must therefore aim for improvement from within the system. Most fully understand their socialist system is highly flawed, yet idealistically believe in what it aims to do.

Unprecedented GOC Receptiveness of Academia?

¶ 9. (C) Consistently throughout the conference, publicly and privately, Cubans -- particularly those involved in socioeconomic research -- were of the opinion that the GOC

HAVANA 00000913 003 OF 003

has been increasingly receptive to their input throughout the past year. Dr. Mayra Paula Espina Prieto, from Havana's Center for Psychological and Sociological Research (CIPS), said in a revealing panel about Cuban social policy challenges that, "We are living in an interesting time full of debate over research studies." Dr. Omar Eveleny Perez Villanueva, economist from the University of Havana's Center for the Study of the Cuban Economy (CEEC) and who co-authored with Harvard University's Jorge Dominguez and Lorena Barberia the just-released -- at the LASA conference -- book "The Cuban Economy at the Beginning of the 21st Century," told Econoff in private that, "Raul Castro has set up a think tank dedicated to brainstorming and evaluating possible economic reforms in one of the floors below his office, which he had ordered cleared and readied for that purpose." Still, they caution that similar approaches between the GOC and academia have taken place in the past and in the end nothing happened.

¶ 10. (C) Professor Juan Triana Cordovi, from University of Havana's CEEC, and who has participated in such approaches during the past 30 years (including the formulation of what eventually became the 1995 law that allowed foreign investment in Cuba), said that the GOC and academia are like "doctor and patient, the GOC comes to us only when it is really sick." He said, "Academia is doing what it always has done, it's just that we have been almost always taken for granted. I can tell you that some of the measures that are being considered now are measures we recommended 12-13 years ago." He added, however, that in his many years of experience, the current level of GOC receptiveness is unprecedented and this causes him to be cautiously optimistic that "some things will actually happen." Even so, he reiterated that history has taught him to keep expectations low.

¶11. (C) Comment: There is a fervent academic debate about possible reforms going on. This may reflect just how "sick" the GOC really is, but it mirrors similar debates that have taken place in other non-official sectors, such as among artists, intellectuals, and, to a more limited extent, common people. Academia, however, specifically the segment that studies socioeconomic perspectives, could influence GOC thinking and potentially short-term reform. It is clear that the highest levels of the GOC have shown at least some receptiveness to academia, have condoned the debate and could possibly be promoting it. Thus far this year, the GOC has taken tiny economic measures that are easily enacted by decree and, at best, will have minimal impact. Whether the GOC leadership intends to adopt and implement some of the more structural changes being debated among academia, remains a mystery -- we believe an unlikely one. We are getting more signs that economic changes will take place, but it is worth noting that, even though this may constitute a step in the right direction, the changes being considered are minuscule when compared to popular expectations, much less the country's real needs. Post will report separately on the economic and then on other issues discussed at LASA by Cuban academics.

PARMLY